# The New Relevance of Basel Basics

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The International Typographic Style of the 1950s—asymmetric sans-serif typography, modular grid systems, and denotative photography—is largely the result of work and teaching at the *Kunstgewerbeschule* Basel. The Basel School of Design is often described as dogmatic and conservative in respect to post-modern trends in graphic design practice. While this description may accurately reflect certain *aesthetic* tendencies, it does not reflect the essence of its pedagogy. This paper presents a case study of projects originating from the *Kunstgewerbeschule* Basel, introduced to the Foundations Program at The American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. The Basel approach to teaching design fosters formal discovery conducive to contextual awareness and critical responsiveness to specific environments. The studio experience in Basel endorses form making as a structure for knowledge production. Ideas arise from the act of making and manipulating visual form. The pedagogical methodologies of the *Kunstgewerbeschule* Basel are much more significant than the specific design artifacts that mark its place in design history.

*History*

The International Typographic Style, or Swiss Style, refers to the graphic design movement that evolved in Switzerland during the 1950s. Emphasizing clarity of information, the International Style propagated an aesthetic of objective photography in place of illustration; asymmetrical arrangement of elements on a modular grid system; sans-serif typography such as Akzidenz Grotesk; and flush left, ragged right configuration of text. Admired for its clean, factual, and highly structured approach to organizing and presenting information, the Swiss Style was embraced worldwide by the 1970s, becoming widely used in American corporate design in order to impart "communicative clarity."[1]

In his book *Swiss Graphic Design,* Richard Hollis identifies the long-held interest in craft skills and technical training within the Swiss educational system, as well as the formation of the Swiss *Werkbund* (Factory Federation), which promoted unity of art and technology, among the factors that account for the emergence of Swiss Style. He also recognizes the influences of the New Typography that evolved in the 1920s in

[1] Meggs-Purvis, 370.

Europe, which strongly rejected ornament, illustration, and symmetry, and favored white space, plain letterform, and photography,[2] as well as a unique "convergence of abstract painting and graphic design"[3] in Switzerland. Max Bill, a painter belonging to the Concrete Art movement in Zürich applied mathematical systems for the organization of space to his graphic design work.

Ernst Keller, the "father of Swiss design," mentored Armin Hofmann, Emil Ruder, and Joseph-Muller Brockman, all of whom were important figures in what became the International Typographic Style. From 1918 and for four decades onward Keller taught a professional course in graphic design at the *Kunstgewerbeschule* Zürich (The Zurich School of Design) rejecting the notion of style in favor of design solutions derived from content.[4] Labeling it as "style," the discourse on the significance of the International Typographic Style has been unfairly reduced to the aesthetic preferences evident in the outcomes of work by designers identified with the movement. To recognize its substance one needs to study the specifics of its origin rooted in the curriculum developed at the Basel School of Design. Existing since the 19th century, independent of De Stijl and the Bauhaus, the school placed design basics at the core of its pedagogy. The school's *Vorkurs* (foundation course) was established in 1908 and served as a base for the teaching approaches developed by its faculty in the 1950s.[5]

*Pedagogy*

The development of a specific pedagogy at the Basel School of Design can largely be attributed to the work of Armin Hofmann and Emil Ruder. While what was espoused in terms of hand-driven craft, perceptual rigor, and a reliance on a basic formal and verbal language was nothing new, it remains of vital relevance today. What Hofmann and Ruder established was an environment in which design was an active practice focused on the generation and observation of form. Such active practice engaged the body—hands, arms, shoulders—in acts of both precision and gesture to manipulate circumstance and environment.

By the 1950s, Hofmann was actively preparing his students for an evolving industry stating that "…we must accustom ourselves to the idea that our mental and vocational equipment must be constantly refurbished."[6] In order to accomplish such a perspective pedagogically, what was taught was much more point-of-view, an observational plateau, than it was skill or technique. The pedagogy of the studio was one based in exercise and experiment. Work that merely replicated professional or industry-based standards was to be avoided, as the instructors maintained the view that graduates of the Basel School of Design would push industry forward.

For Hofmann, the studio was an environment of potential and discovery, of knowledge waiting amongst the basic graphic elements and forms found in the exercises. Especially in design basics, Hofmann saw the primary relationship amongst forms as one of confrontation. Through active play, the designer revealed or

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[2] Hollis, 16.
[3] Hollis, 10.
[4] Meggs-Purvis, 356.
[5] Meggs-Purvis, 356.
[6] Hofmann, 40.

concealed the relationships between elements and formats. The arrival at a decision, however, was a confrontation between the inanimate nature of form (though imbued with specific quality and character) and the animate nature of design activity. Such a perspective acknowledges the nature of design activity as an intervention, an interruption of conditions that would otherwise be resolved or inert.

From this almost meditative point of view, a single point on a page is a major intervention; it implies two lines, one vertical and one horizontal, and thus recomposes the entire surface. It confronts, it intervenes, and it can be placed and replaced until it accomplishes a desired end or activates the space.[7] To view design as the activity that guides even this smallest of interventions is to call into question every assumption, precondition, prejudice, or a priori judgment, and places the responsibility to manifest form solely on the shoulders of the designer.

The pedagogy that coalesced in Basel was unique in Switzerland; Zürich, Lausanne, and other programs in central Europe quickly became—or were from the outset—more dogmatic in their approach and expectations. Helmut Schmid, a student of the Basel School, noted of Ruder's typographic teaching that "form is not made, it is developed."[8] Beyond such a broad embrace of design activity as an iterative process are the specifics that Schmid experienced in Ruder's typography studio: "words and lines were not hand sketched as was common at the time—words were proofed in the hand-press and then cut and placed on a given paper size. The lines were moved until a clear composition was found."[9]

The dedication to discovery through process, a process of making and endless refinement, sets Basel apart from other pedagogical approaches in Switzerland and Germany. Although both Hofmann and Ruder made dogmatic claims in published texts, their studio outcomes spoke to the potential of accident, circumstance, and openness to honestly assessing all results as formally valid if arrived at through a process of experimentation. Schmid now adapts the basics of the Basel approach to his teaching in Japan. Students print out their type from a digital source before beginning the process of composition by hand. Through the simplest of means with one typeface and one type size, Schmid sees his exercises in basic typography as needing "to be experienced through limitation and meditation."[10]

The role of the hand in form and type was reinforced by another student of the Basel School of Design, Wolfgang Weingart. Weingart's first exercise with Hofmann in the spring of 1964 was one of consistent reduction using only line to compose and activate a square space. While these so-called "finger exercises" were quickly ignored due to Weingart's protesting impatience, he engaged Ruder's letterpress machines to accomplish what others labored over with ruling pens.[11] The recognition of process remained a basic principle of Hofmann's teaching; whether ruling pen or press were used, the objective of the studio was to physically commit to the activity of design.

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[7] Hofmann, 41.
[8] Schmid, 273.
[9] Schmid, 273.
[10] Schmid, 287.
[11] Weingart, 83.

Weingart also served as the chief proponent of change within Swiss typography as both designer and educator. He grew impatient not with the pedagogy of the studio, but with Ruder's tendency towards formal reduction. Ruder threatened Weingart with expulsion in 1966, but Weingart dedicated himself to finish a consecutive two-year course of study, finishing in 1968. After finishing this course under Ruder, Weingart was offered a position at the Basel School of Design, and although he forever changed the formal output of the school, his dedication to the pedagogical underpinnings of process and hand-driven decisions remained intact.

The pedagogical continuity and simultaneous formal rupture that the presence of Weingart in Basel embodied is significant in that it demonstrates a pedagogy that does not determine formal outcome. Rather, to the contrary, the pedagogy of Basel continued with Weingart's influence but embraced the formal shifts he discovered through the same dedication to basics and hand-driven processes, even through the arrival of the first Macintosh computers at the school in 1984. Almost 20 years earlier, Weingart had warily faced the introduction of phototypesetting and the advances and freedoms such composition methods afforded designers who were previously limited to letterpress. "Phototypesetting with its technical possibilities is leading today's typography into a game without game rules. Such technology will forever transfigure the craft of typography and its aesthetic basis, namely, the correspondence between hand skills and physical material," he noted.[12] His later adoption of the Macintosh into the type studio of Basel was met with basic preconditions: form and type must first be understood through physical acts with physical consequences. Only then can other processes and techniques be introduced to the broader practice of design.

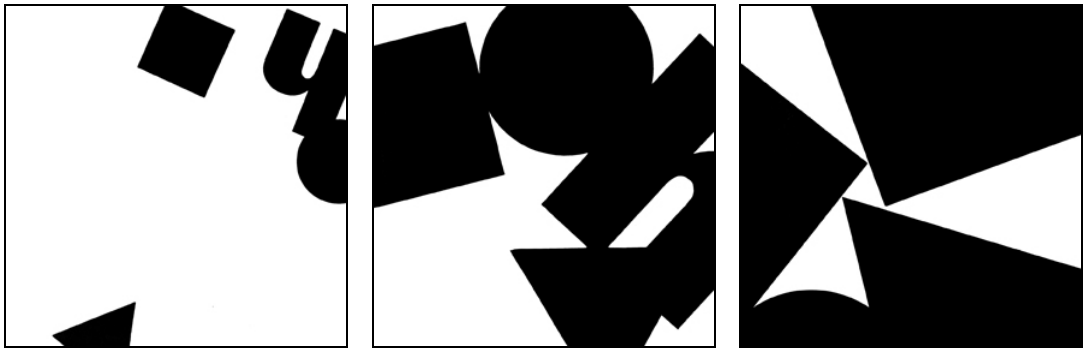
*Case Study*

The case study for this paper is based in the United Arab Emirates, a country undergoing massive infrastructural and socio-cultural transformation. These changes have transformed fishing villages into dynamic visual and urban environments. As a result, design pedagogy must address students who live in a place subject to constant change. Such a context calls for a design practice based in improvisation, able to adapt to frequent shifts in conventions, rules, and routines. In order to arrive at a practice of improvisation, students should primarily experience design as a process of critical observation, and of assessing the past, present, and potential qualities of a given situation or set of circumstances.

Beginning in the Foundations Year at American University of Sharjah (UAE), students are exposed to projects that reinforce a slow engagement with basic design principles and elements. The basic composition exercises (fig. 1 – 3.) engage students in the active manipulation of surface through the movement of simple geometric forms and single letterforms. Composition in this sense is not a static arrangement or outcome, but an active process of spatial investigation. Students work not towards a single finished composition but within a series of iterations through which they gain an understanding of the principles that define visual relationships within a given space. The pace of the studio must accommodate time for active reflection on the task at hand. One may perceive the process as inefficient, but this must be embraced to allow observation to take place. By visiting each student, the instructor participates in

[12] Weingart, 112.

the process by attempting to compose the given elements. The interaction between student and instructor allows both to experience composition as a process of discovery. The focus on immediacy eliminates pre-conceived ideas and demonstrates to students that knowledge is located in practice.



(fig. 1 – 3.)

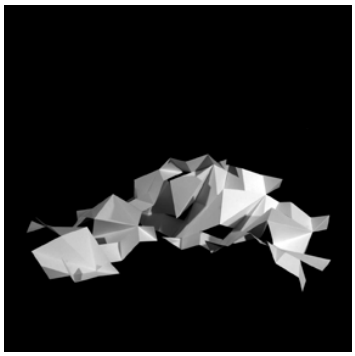
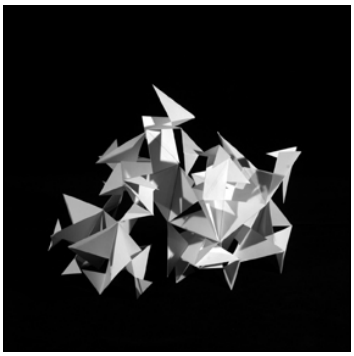
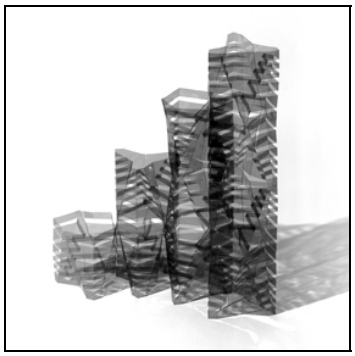
The form and space exercise (fig. 4 – 6.) employs folding as a process for engaging small-scale 3D objects. The exercise moves into sequential, then structural, implications of repeated and altered form. The activity is once again at the level of the hand, and relates back to the composition exercise in that students are asked to observe and consider both surface characteristics, as well as volume and perimeter qualities. The students develop 3D objects from 8cm$^2$ sheets of paper. The lightness of material and small scale makes the entire design process accessible through simple intervention. The focus is on formal quality, not on the representational or referential identity of the objects. The folds in the surface of the paper are the content.

Students develop a library of paper models through bending, folding, grooving, scoring, cutting, twisting, tearing, and piercing. Dichotomies such as static/dynamic, surface/edge, structure/decoration, and format/direction are introduced to enable students to observe the transformation of flat plane into tectonic form. The form variations are then arranged into categories according to their formal qualities and/or making processes.

(fig. 4 – 6.)

In the final phase of the project (fig. 7 – 9.), students select one model from their library to use as a unit-form in the construction of a super-structure. The focus is on the systematic generation of form. The control in the making of unit-form must continue through the combination and connection of the units into a larger whole. Intersection, rotation, edge, surface and point must all be considered as variables in

the activity of assembling a larger structure. The material choice extends beyond plain paper to include plastics, foils, and other options that can sustain a successful fold. Complexity of form is an intended outcome, but students experience that intricacy and detail within one unit does not necessarily translate into the same quality in a super-structure. Only through the accumulation and multiplication of individual forms can students arrive at true complexity. In this sense, each phase of the project instills process and material as the drivers of form, not a priori idea or concept.

(fig. 7 – 9.)

*Conclusion*

The focus on rigorous perceptual studies of visual form embraced in Basel provided skills for the critical evaluation of circumstances ranging from the characteristics in a letterform to an object or landscape.[13] Such skills do not impart aesthetic preference, nor do they entail adherence to a formal dogma, but rather offer a basic set of tools with which to engage the environment. Design students in the UAE are in need of such awareness, and the environment is in need of the attention such awareness can manifest. Though the exercises and projects remain modest in scope, we feel it is prudent to approach the complexities of the region with a pedagogy that allows for constant assessment and re-assessment.

[13] Olpe, 14.

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